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Opening extract from

The Henderson Boys 2: Eagle Day

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Germany invaded France in May 1940. Within six weeks Paris had fallen and French troops were in full retreat. Millions of terrified civilians had fled south ahead of the invasion.

After withdrawing its beaten army at Dunkirk, France's ally, Britain, laid plans for a network of spies inside German-occupied Europe known as leave-behinds. *But the swift German advance led to the capture of British intelligence headquarters in Amsterdam, and details of the entire spy network fell into enemy hands.*

MI6 operatives in Belgium, Holland and France were either captured and executed or forced to flee. By the time the Germans took Paris on 14 June only one British spy continued operating in France, a thirty-three-year-old Royal Navy Commander attached to an obscure department known as the Espionage Research Unit. His name was Charles Henderson.

Henderson was tasked with stealing the blueprints for a revolutionary miniature radio transceiver. On the night of 15 June Henderson reached the port of Bordeaux, less than a hundred and fifty kilometres ahead of the German invaders. He had a leather case containing the prized blueprints, three young companions, and the Gestapo on his tail.

Henderson secured passage aboard the last steamer plying the route between Bordeaux and England, but twelve-year-old Marc Kilgour had no passport and French officials refused boarding. Henderson entrusted the blueprints to his other companions – eleven-year-old Paul Clarke and his thirteen-year-old sister, Rosie.

While the siblings boarded the SS Cardiff Bay, *Henderson stayed behind with Marc, intending to get him a passport and take the next steamer to England.*

CHAPTER ONE

It was eleven at night, but the port of Bordeaux crackled with life. Refugee kids slumped in humid alleyways, using their mothers' bellies for pillows. Drunken soldiers and marooned sailors scrapped, sang and peed against blacked-out streetlamps. Steamers lined up three abreast at the wharves, waiting for a coal train that showed no sign of arriving soon.

With roads clogged and no diesel for trucks, the dockside was choked with produce while people went hungry less than twenty kilometres away. Meat and veg surrendered to maggots, while recently arrived boats had nowhere to unload and ditched rotting cargo into the sea.

A man and a boy strode along the dock wall, alongside rusting bollards and oranges catching moonlight as

they bobbed in the water between a pair of Indian cargo ships.

'Will the consulate be open this late?' Marc Kilgour asked.

Marc was twelve. He was well built, with a scruffy blond tangle down his brow and his shirt clutched over his nose to mask the sickly odour of rotting bananas. The pigskin bag over Marc's shoulder held everything he owned.

Charles Henderson walked beside him: six feet of wiry muscle and a face that would look better after a night's sleep and an encounter with a sharp blade. Disguised as peasants, the pair wore corduroy trousers and white shirts damp with sweat. A suitcase strained Henderson's right arm and the metal objects inside jangled as he grabbed Marc's collar and yanked him off course.

'Look where you're putting your feet!'

Marc looked back and saw that his oversized boot had been saved from a mound of human shit. With a hundred thousand refugees in town it was a common enough sight, but Marc's stomach still recoiled. A second later he kicked the outstretched leg of a young woman with dead eyes and bandaged toes.

'Pardon me,' Marc said, but she didn't even notice. The woman had drunk herself into a stupor and no one would bat an eye if she turned up dead at sunrise.

Since running away from his orphanage two weeks earlier, Marc had trained himself to block out the

horrible things he saw all around: from mumbling old dears suffering heat stroke to escaped pigs lapping the blood around corpses at the roadside.

The port was under blackout, so Henderson didn't see Marc's sad eyes, but he sensed a shudder in the boy's breathing and pressed a hand against his back.

'What can we do, mate?' Henderson asked soothingly. 'There's millions of them . . . You have to look after number one.'

Marc found comfort in Henderson's hand, which made him think of the parents he'd never known.

'If I get to England, what happens?' Marc asked nervously. He wanted to add, *Can I live with you?* but choked on the words.

They turned away from the dockside, on to a street lined with warehouses. Clumps of refugees from the north sat under corrugated canopies designed to keep goods dry as they were loaded on to trucks. Despite the late hour a half-dozen boys played a rowdy game of football, using cabbages stolen from the wharves.

Henderson ignored Marc's tricky question, instead answering the one he'd asked two minutes earlier.

'The consulate will be closed, but we have nowhere to stay and the office is sure to be inundated by morning. We might be able to find our own way in . . .'

Henderson tailed off as a pair of German planes swept overhead. The lads playing cabbage football made

machine-gun noises and hurled curses over the sea, until their parents yelled at them to cut the racket before it woke younger siblings.

'I'm French,' Marc noted seriously. 'I don't speak a word of English, so how can you get me a British passport?'

'We'll manage,' Henderson said confidently, as he stopped walking for a moment and switched his heavy case from one arm to the other. 'After all we've been through, you should trust me by now.'

The consulate was only a kilometre from the dockside, but Henderson insisted he knew better than the directions jotted down by an official at the passenger terminal. They traipsed muggy streets where the smell of sewage mixed with sea air, until a friendly-but-sozzled dockworker set them back on the right path.

'I wonder where Paul and Rosie are,' Marc said, as they broke into a cobbled square with a crumbling fountain at its centre.

'They'll be upriver, close to open sea by now,' Henderson reckoned, after a glance at his watch. 'There's U-boats[1] prowling and the captain will want to reach the English Channel before daylight.'

A courthouse spanned one side of the square, with a domed church opposite and a couple of gendarmes[2]

[1]U-boat – a German submarine.

[2]Gendarmes – French police officers.

standing watch, their main purpose apparently to stop refugees settling on the church steps. The British consulate stood in a neat terrace of offices, jewellers, pawnbrokers and banks.

One end of this row had suffered structural damage from a bomb meant for the docks. Even in moonlight you could see the dramatically warped façade above a jeweller's shop and broken roof slates swept to a tidy pile at the side.

With low-flying bombers and the German forces expected to reach Bordeaux within the week, the Union Jack flag had tactfully been removed from the consulate, but nothing could be done about the British lions woven into wrought-iron gates padlocked across the front door.

Several of His Majesty's subjects gathered on the front steps, with noticeably better clothing and luggage than the refugees scavenging food along the dockside, but Henderson was wary. The Gestapo[3] were still after him and they could easily have spies watching what remained of Bordeaux's British community.

Henderson would stand out amongst the other Brits in his peasant clothing and Marc spoke no English, so rather than join the queue and wait for nine a.m., he led Marc around the rear of the terrace and was pleased to find that it backed on to a sheltered alleyway. The

[3]Gestapo – German secret police.

bombing had fractured a water pipe beneath the cobbles and their boots swilled through several centimetres of water.

'Have you still got my torch?' Henderson whispered, when they reached the rear door of the consulate.

The batteries were weak and the beam faltered as Marc scanned the brickwork. After snatching his torch Henderson squatted down and aimed light through the letterbox.

'Nobody home,' he said, as the metal flap snapped shut. 'No sign of an alarm, no bars at the windows. If I give you a boost, do you reckon you can get yourself through the small window?'

Marc craned his head up as Henderson aimed the torch so that he could see.

'What about the two cops in the square?' Marc asked. 'They'll hear if the glass goes.'

Henderson shook his head. 'It's a sash window; you should be able to force it open with a lever.'

Henderson stepped back out of the puddle and found dry cobbles on which to lay and open his case. Marc noticed shadowy figures passing the end of the alleyway, then jolted at the distinctive click of Henderson loading his pistol.

Marc was delighted that a British agent was going to all this bother on his account. Henderson could have abandoned him at the passenger terminal and sailed

aboard the *Cardiff Bay* with Paul and Rosie. But as well as a soft heart, Henderson had a ruthless streak and the gun made Marc uneasy.

In the three days since Marc first met Henderson in Paris, Henderson had shot or blown up half a dozen Germans and machine-gunned a grovelling Frenchman in his bathtub. If the next figure at the end of the alleyway chose to come and investigate, Marc knew Henderson would kill them without a thought.

Henderson passed over a crowbar before screwing a silencer to the front of his pistol. Marc ran his hand along the oiled bar and glimpsed inside the suitcase: ammunition, a compact machine gun, a zipped pouch in which Marc knew lay gold ingots and a stack of French currency. The clothes and toilet bag seemed like an afterthought, squeezed into the bottom right corner. Marc found it miraculous that Henderson could lift all this, let alone carry it several kilometres through the port.

After fastening leather buckles and tipping the jangling case back on its side, Henderson faced the building and lowered his knee into the puddle. Marc leaned against the wall and stepped up so that his wet boots balanced on Henderson's shoulders.

'Now I'm really glad you didn't tread in that pile of turds,' Henderson noted.

Despite nerves and his precarious position astride

Henderson's shoulders, Marc snorted with laughter.

'Don't make me giggle,' he said firmly, walking his hands up the brickwork as Henderson stood, raising Marc level with the landing window between ground and first floors.

Marc rested his chest against the wall, then took the crowbar from his back pocket.

'You're heavier than you look,' Henderson huffed, as Marc's unsteady boots tore at his skin.

The oak window frame was rotting and Henderson felt a shower of flaking paint as Marc dug the forked tongue of the crowbar under the frame and pushed as hard as he dared. The catch locking the two sliding panes together was strong, but the two screws holding it in place lifted easily from the dried-out wood.

'Gotcha,' Marc whispered triumphantly, as he threw the window open.

To Henderson's relief, Marc's weight shifted as the boy pulled himself through the window. He crashed down on to plush carpet inside, narrowly avoiding a vase and a knock-out encounter with the banister.

Beeswax and old varnish filled Marc's nose as he hurried downstairs. The building was small, but its pretensions were grand and paintings of wigged men and naval battles lined the short flight of steps down to the back door.

Henderson grabbed his suitcase as Marc pulled across

two heavy bolts and opened the back door. Beyond the stairwell the ground floor comprised a single large room. They moved amongst desks and cabinets, separated from the waiting area at the opposite end by an ebony countertop and spiralled gold rails.

Marc was fascinated by the tools of bureaucracy: typewriters, rubber stamps, carbon papers and hole punches.

'So they keep blank passports here?' Marc asked, as he stared at the banks of wooden drawers along one wall.

'If they haven't run out,' Henderson said, as he slammed his heavy case on a desktop, tilting a stack of envelopes on to the parquet floor. 'But we can't make a passport without a photograph.'

Henderson pulled a leather wallet out of his case. The miniature photographic kit comprised a matchbox-sized pinhole camera, tiny vials of photographic chemicals and sheets of photographic paper large enough to produce the kind of pictures used in identity documents.

'Go stand under the wall clock,' Henderson said, as he worked with the tiny camera, inserting a small rectangle of photographic paper.

Henderson looked up and saw a peculiar mix of apprehension and emotion on Marc's face.

'Nobody ever took my photograph before,' he admitted.

Henderson looked surprised. 'Not at the school or the orphanage?'

Marc shook his head.

'We've got very little light,' Henderson explained, as he propped the camera on a stack of ledgers. 'So I need you to stay *absolutely* still and keep your eyes open.'

Marc stood rigid for twenty seconds, then rushed forwards on Henderson's signal.

'When can I see it?' he asked, as he blinked his stinging eyes repeatedly.

'I have a developing kit,' Henderson explained. 'There must be a kitchen somewhere. I need you to find me three saucers and some warm water.'

As Marc raced upstairs to find the kitchen, Henderson began looking around the offices for blank passports. He discovered an entire drawer full of them, along with a wooden cigar box containing all the necessary stamps and, most helpfully, a crumpled blue manual detailing the correct procedure for dealing with a consular passport application.

One of the telephones rang, but Henderson ignored it and began shaking his photographic chemicals, ready for when Marc came back with the water.

A second phone thrummed as Marc came downstairs with three saucers and a tobacco tin filled with hot tap water. Henderson found the ringing irritating, but with France in chaos it didn't surprise him that the consular phones would ring through the night.

'I need absolute darkness to develop the photograph,'

Henderson explained, as he spread out the three saucers and dipped a fragile glass thermometer in the hot water. 'Get the lights.'

Once the office lights were out and the blinds at the rear adjusted to shield the moonlight, Henderson gathered his saucers of chemicals in tight formation, leaned forwards over the desk and flipped the jacket he'd been carrying in his suitcase over his head, protecting his equipment from any remaining light.

Marc watched as Henderson fidgeted mysteriously beneath the jacket and the sweet smell of developing fluid filled the air. He stripped the rectangle of photographic paper from the camera and counted the ticks of his watch to ensure it spent the correct time in the developing fluid.

Marc had no idea how long it would be before Henderson emerged with the developed photograph. He thought of asking, but didn't want to affect Henderson's concentration.

'Have you ever made a cup of tea, Marc?' Henderson asked, once he'd moved the sliver of paper from the developer into the bleaching solution.

'Sorry . . .' Marc said weakly. 'I've never even drunk it.'

'You're a blank canvas, Marc Kilgour,' Henderson laughed. 'You go upstairs, put a kettle on the stove and I'll show you how to make a proper English cuppa while your picture dries.'

'What's a cuppa?' Marc asked, liking the word, even if he wasn't sure what it meant.

Henderson trembled with laughter beneath the jacket.

He didn't laugh for long, though. Both phones had stopped ringing, but it became clear from a loud scuffling sound that something was happening on the steps out front.

'Those gendarmes must have heard us breaking in,' Marc said anxiously, as the metal gates over the front door whined for a shot of oil. 'I bet it was them on the phone.'

Henderson remained calm. 'Ignore your emotions and use your brain,' he said firmly as he pulled his head out from beneath the jacket. 'The police don't phone up and ask burglars if they'd be kind enough to leave and the Germans certainly wouldn't tip us off with a fracas on the doorstep. I just need half a minute now to fix the image. Go up to the front window and tell me what you see.'

Marc vaulted the counter and dodged two lines of chairs in the waiting room, then peeked through a tiny crack in the velvet curtains. A white Jaguar sports car had parked up on the cobbles and an anxious crowd hassled its female driver as she unlocked the gates.

'Guessing it's someone who works here,' Marc hissed. 'She's got keys and everyone in the queue's giving her stress.'

Marc could hear what was being said, but it was all in English so he didn't have a clue.

'I have urgent consular business,' the woman yelled. 'You all need to come back in the morning. We're open normal office hours. Nine to five and noon on Saturday.'

Marc ducked behind chairs as the woman squeezed through the front door and told the people outside to mind their fingers before banging it shut.

As soon as she flicked on the lights she saw Henderson. He'd finished developing Marc's photograph and stood behind the counter with his arms out wide to make it clear that he was no threat.

'I'm sorry to startle you like this, Madame. The name's Henderson. Charles Henderson.'

Marc studied the woman from his position crouching behind the chairs. She was in her twenties, and nearly six feet tall. She wore the white blouse and pleated skirt of an office girl, but sculpted black hair and an elegant gold watch gave the impression that she lived off somewhat more than an office girl's salary.

'Charles Henderson,' the woman said knowingly. 'I decoded a transcript from London. Quite a few people are looking for you. Of course, if you're *really* Henderson, you'll know his code word.'

'Seraphim,' Henderson answered, as the woman placed her bag on the countertop then kicked on a wooden panel and ducked under. Marc's eyebrows shot

up as he sighted the tops of her stockings.

'I do beg your pardon, but young Marc here needs a passport. We did a bit of damage to your landing window but it's easily fixed . . .'

'Forgive me,' the woman said, making a quick glance back at Marc before cutting Henderson dead with a raised hand. 'My name is Maxine Clere, clerical assistant to the consul. Please make use of our facilities . . . It looks like you've found the blank passports already. I know your work is important, but I have to make immediate contact with London on the scrambled telephone. We've lost the *Cardiff Bay* on the River Garonne, less than thirty kilometres out of Bordeaux – and many are dead.'